

Nigeria

Lifestyle

Dating and Marriage

Dating and Courtship

Most young people choose their spouses. Dating begins in the mid- to late teens. Western-style dating is uncommon in rural areas but is increasingly common among urban youth. Parents generally disapprove of casual dating, so young people often date without their knowledge, only introducing their partners to their parents after making plans to marry. The growing use of cell phones and social networking websites has made it easier for young people to meet and socialize without parental knowledge. Many young people begin dating when they start university in a city, as dating may not be acceptable in their home village. Couples may meet at church, at school, at cultural events, or in the community. Common dating activities include picnics, concerts, and cultural events. Couples may also spend time at each other's homes, eat at restaurants, go on walks, and attend nightclubs.

Some parents arrange marriages for their children. Among certain ethnic groups, such as the Ibo, young people are free to date, but once they are considered adults with the means to marry, their parents arrange a marriage for them. Muslim youth are closely supervised when spending time with members of the opposite sex, and any physical contact before marriage is forbidden.

Engagement

When a couple is ready to marry, the man proposes to the woman. If she accepts, he makes arrangements to visit her parents. He is accompanied by his parents or uncles, one of whom is chosen to speak on his behalf as a show of respect to the bride's family. While this person does most of the talking, at a certain point in the meeting, the prospective groom is asked to confirm that the request is being made on his behalf. Among some ethnic groups, the groom's family sends the request in a letter, which the bride's family initially ignores but eventually answers. If the two families agree to the marriage, a date is set to arrange the dowry.

Marriage in Society

The payment of a bride-price is common throughout the country and is usually part of the wedding ceremony. The groom is expected to give money, property (such as kola nuts, food, drinks, and clothing), or service to the family of the bride as compensation for the loss of their daughter. In some ethnic groups, the contents of the bride-price are

standard and have not changed for several generations, while in other groups, the couple's families negotiate what the bride-price will include. In some groups, the bride-price is relatively affordable for the average person; in others, it can take years to save up. When the bride-price is high, a couple may choose to live together instead of marrying, though this arrangement is not well accepted in society. Couples who wish to marry but cannot afford the bride-price may live together, have children, and carry out the marriage rituals in several installments, sometimes over many years. Some northern governments provide subsidies to help such couples marry and avoid violating *shari'ah* (Islamic law).

Marriage is greatly valued in Nigerian society, and most people hope to marry in a public ceremony, though economic challenges make this difficult for many. Men often marry in their mid-twenties. Women usually marry by age 20, though in some northern states they can marry in their early teens. Many men delay marriage until they are financially stable, often in their thirties. The marriage age is generally younger in rural areas than in cities.

Weddings

Weddings may be traditional, religious, or civil. Customs vary greatly according to ethnic group. Traditional marriages are the most common, followed by religious ceremonies. Traditional marriages are celebrated with refreshments and music and dances by local bands and dance troupes, usually in a style related to the bride's ethnic group. Among the Efik, the wedding includes a coming-of-age ceremony at which the parents of the bride publicly present her with gifts for her future home. Among some groups in the north, the groom may be flogged to show that he is strong enough to protect the bride. Traditional marriages in the south are held at the bride's family home; the family of the bride has the responsibility to host and entertain the groom and his guests.

Christian weddings vary by denomination. Ceremonies usually take place in a church and are conducted by a priest, who pronounces the couple husband and wife after they exchange rings and vows. The groom wears a suit or tuxedo, and the bride wears a white Western-style wedding gown. A reception is usually held at the church, a rented event center, or the home of one set of the couple's parents.

Muslim marriage ceremonies take place at the bride's home but involve only men; the bride does not attend. The men from the two families finalize and exchange the bride-price. When the wedding is complete, the men cheer to announce the marriage to the women. A celebration is then held, with food, drinks, music, and dancing. However, the wedding is not complete until the following day, when the bride is escorted to her

husband's house. On this day, the couple may host a celebration for friends and family. Men and women celebrate in separate areas, listening to music, having refreshments, and giving speeches in honor of the bride and groom.

In most of the country, a marriage must contain a civil ceremony performed by a marriage registrar in order to be legal. Many couples see little value in a legal marriage, but a growing number of younger couples include a civil ceremony. In northern Nigeria, under *shari'ah* law, Muslim marriages are not required to include a civil ceremony in order to be considered legal. Polygamous marriages cannot be registered civilly, although they are acceptable according to custom and religion.

Polygamy

By Islamic law, a Muslim man can have as many as four wives as long as he has the consent of his wives and provided he can support each wife equally. Many non-Muslim men also practice polygamy, and about 30 percent of all women are in polygamous marriages. In polygamous households, each wife may have her own building in a compound or room in a home.

Divorce

Divorce is rare but not unheard of. Because marriage is considered a lifetime commitment, divorce is frowned upon. Since most marriages are not registered with the government, a couple may be considered divorced if they simply stop living together. In some groups, a woman has the right to return to her family home if she is unhappy in a marriage. In other groups, a woman loses the right to live in her parents' home when she marries, making divorce difficult. There is considerable stigma attached to divorce, and divorced women find it harder to remarry than divorced men.

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